



# Tennessee's Pre-K Program Quality Improvement Highlights 2016–2020

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Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K Program ("TN-VPK") experienced significant improvements between 2016 and 2020 due to unwavering commitment from state leaders and partners.

The improvements began with the passing of a critical piece of legislation in the Tennessee General Assembly in 2016. Knowing that in order for pre-k to be most effective, every classroom must meet high standards for quality, Tennesseans for Quality Early Education ("TQEE") worked with state leaders and the Tennessee General Assembly to develop and pass the Pre-K Quality Act of 2016, which directed the TDOE to significantly improve the consistency of quality of state-funded pre-k programs.

The Pre-K Quality Act of 2016 was followed by important improvements, beginning during the Governor Bill Haslam administration and continuing with the Governor Bill Lee administration. The following are highlights of those advances.

## Curriculum & Instruction

**Pre-k quality** has been defined. For the first time since the VPK program was founded, pre-k quality has been defined in a clear, coherent and evidenced-based definition. All pre-k improvement efforts are aligned to the definition to ensure consistency in quality.

**Pre-k, K,** and 1st through 3rd grade standards have been revised. **TN's K-12 Academic Standards** and **Early Learning Developmental Standards** have been revised and aligned in English Language Arts and Math. Standards were implemented in 2017-18.

**New curriculum has been adopted.** The TDOE's Office of Early Learning reduced the number of state-approved pre-k curricula from 37 options to 3 evidenced-based, high-quality curricula. The department invested in training and materials for VPK districts to implement the new high-quality curricula in 2018-19.

**Early literacy tools have been developed and provided to districts to improve pre-k literacy instruction.** TDOE's Office of Early Learning has developed supplemental curriculum for TN-VPK programs that provides teaching tools and resources for foundational early literacy skills. TN-VPK teachers no longer have to develop their own tools nor do they have to align pre-k curriculum with kindergarten literacy curriculum on their own. The new Foundational Skills Curriculum Supplement provides guidance, recommendations, and unit-specific lesson plans and instructional materials for teachers and districts.

## Data & Accountability

**Pre-k funding is dependent on demonstrated progress towards high quality.** Prior to 2016, districts received VPK funds based on formulas largely unchanged since VPK's founding a decade prior. In 2016-17, TDOE instituted a competitive grant process aligned to quality benchmarks. The TN-VPK grant application sets a high bar for programs to meet in order to ensure their programs are funded.

**Pre-k and kindergarten teachers monitor student learning.** In 2017-18, TDOE instituted a new **pre-k and kindergarten student growth portfolio model** that helps teachers track and monitor student learning aligned to priority literacy and math standards. The portfolio model is a significant quality improvement because teachers' evaluations are now aligned to benchmarks that demonstrate students' academic progress, versus a school-wide or district-wide 3<sup>rd</sup> grade end-of-year assessment.

**Districts are required to collect, report, and use classroom observation data to coach every pre-k teacher toward instructional improvements.** Districts that receive TN-VPK funding are required to conduct classroom observations using a state-approved assessment tool, and provide coaching support inclusive of classroom culture and climate, classroom organization, and instructional supports. The TDOE provided extensive training to districts and programs between 2018-2020 to implement this tool, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System ("CLASS"), for reliable and valid data collection.

**Pre-k quality is determined using multiple metrics and tools.** TDOE is in the process of developing and implementing multiple measurement tools aligned to pre-k quality criteria to identify and scale high-quality across the statewide TN-VPK program. TDOE is also using this data to inform technical assistance for continuous quality improvement. These metrics include:

- ★ A classroom environment rubric that assesses the quality of instructional materials;
- ★ A program structure rubric that assesses how time is used and how curriculum is implemented;
- ★ The CLASS observation tool that assesses social-emotional supports, classroom organization and instructional supports;
- ★ An IPG Foundational Skills rubric that assesses early literacy instruction;
- ★ A Foundational Skills Diagnostic that assesses early literacy learning; and
- ★ A staffing quality checklist that assesses teacher qualifications, credentials and professional development opportunities.

## COVID Response

***Pre-k instructional resources and supports are provided to help schools and families adapt to virtual and hybrid teaching & learning.*** TDOE's Office of Early Learning responded to the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic's impact on schools and districts by pivoting quickly to create multiple tools and resources to continue student learning, whether students attended school in-person or virtually at-home. These resources include instructional videos for teachers and parents, toolkits regarding school closures and re-opening, weekly office hours for TN-VPK Directors, bi-monthly webinars, weekly newsletters, and PBS programming via a partnership with the Public Broadcasting Service. These resources will continue to be provided for the foreseeable future, including for the duration of the pandemic.

Looking ahead the TDOE is directing pre-k improvement efforts to effective responses to learning loss resulting from the pandemic, a continued focus on improving literacy and math outcomes in the early grades, increasing access to pre-k programs for the state's most disadvantaged young learners, and providing valuable resources and supports for districts, schools, and teachers as they grapple with the aftermath of an unprecedented year of challenge and four years of significant change and transformation.